



Pilgrimage to the Classroom
by Rabbi Gavriel Goldfeder

Subject Area: Holidays, Jewish history & Culture, Torah/Talmud, and Values.

Multi lesson plan

Target age: Jewish Educators

Objectives: This is a multi-lesson unit meant to teach educators about different modalities of education as discussed in the Talmud Chagigah. The lesson plan works on two distinct levels – the first is focused on teachers, the second on students. Teachers will enhance their vocabulary and skills pertaining to varying modalities in education, using ‘Pilgrimage to the Classroom’ as a model. Students will 1) benefit from the variety of modalities presented in the classroom 2) hopefully see the classroom as a holy place, replete with many dynamic angles for education and 3) come to appreciate the Talmud and other classical Jewish texts as relevant to modern problems.

Subject matter: As mentioned, this is more a lesson plan for teachers than it is for students. While it may serve for the teacher to present the Pilgrimage model as a metaphor for the classroom, I have not included such a pursuit in this lesson plan.

Someone who can facilitate a session of Talmud learning must present this course. At the beginning of the first session, the parallel between Pilgrimage and Education would be presented. The challenge – to turn our classroom into a pilgrimage, and to sue the Talmud’s ideas about educational moments



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within the pilgrimage, would also be expressed.

In each of the five sessions, those gathered would study the short, relevant passage of Talmud. The questions listed here would be asked, and conversation encouraged. At the beginning of each subsequent session, the teachers will be asked how they were able to relate last session's lessons in the classroom. This will be the basis of a dialogue about these ideas are presented in a classroom that already operates under multiple intelligences and modalities. The hope is that, through encouraging already-well-trained educators to expand their repertoire they will feel out the



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limits and possibilities inherent in these lesson plans.

The Talmud Chagigah discusses the laws and depths of the Pilgrimage Festivals - Pesach, Shavuot, and Sukkot. On each of these holidays, the Jews were encouraged to go to Jerusalem where they would bring sacrifices and perform various rituals.

On a deeper level, however, they would have a multi-layered educational experience that could change their lives forever. This experience cannot be facsimilated so easily, but we can learn important lessons about education in the classroom, the synagogue, and in the home from some of the rules and lure surrounding the Pilgrimage.

Lesson number one: Seeing and Being Seen

With text Talmud Chagigah page 2a. Certain passages will be intriguing, but are not relevant for this lesson.



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The Torah uses a funny word for what happens when we arrive at the destination of the pilgrimage – ‘Three times during the year *they will be seen*’. The word in Hebrew is ראה. Without the vowels, it is of ambiguous meaning – either ‘to see’ or ‘to be seen’. The Talmud invokes this verse to tell us at that someone who is blind in one eye is not required to go on Pilgrimage, as that person will not be able to benefit fully from the experience. Why not? There is some sort of reflexive relationship between how we see and how we are seen.



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Question 1: How is entering the classroom, the synagogue, or any learning situation like a pilgrimage?

Question 2: The Talmud draws a line of connection between how we see and how we are seen. What is the relationship between how a student sees, and how he or she is seen?

The Talmud clearly reads ‘the way he comes to see is the way he will be seen.’ Some people find this to be an impossibility, and therefore a mistake. After all, who can see G-d? But in the context of education, it may be quite relevant. Rashi, a famous commentary on the Talmud, explains the difficult passage this way: ‘Just as G-d comes to see you, so will G-d be seen by you’

Question 3: If the teacher were playing G-d, how would Rashi’s classroom look? How do we ‘look’ at our students, and what effect does this have on how they learn?

It is, of course, somewhat unnecessary and unrealistic for the teacher to play G-d. This is particularly true in context of our future discussions on this passage. The teacher, as we will find, plays but one role among many in the educational experience. The child will learn as much from peers, text, context, and environment. And yet the teacher can act to orchestrate those other factors into an accessible and integrated experience.

Question 4: How *can* the teacher ‘look’ at the child in order to help the child ‘see’ a positive educational experience?

Question 5: How do we find out what the child is really seeing?

Question 6: How can we orchestrate the many factors in a teaching situation physically, emotionally, and otherwise in order to maximize



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educational impact?

Question 7: How is this done for multiple students at the same time?

Lesson two – deaf and mute – absorption and expression

With Chagigah 2b – bottom to 3a middle.

A deaf person is not required to attend Pilgrimage, either. It is important to understand why this is so.

Question 1: Take an initial guess – why is a deaf person not required to attend the pilgrimage?

First we must define deaf, for the Talmud has many categories. There are some who speak but do not hear, some who hear but do not speak, and some who neither hear nor speak

Question 2: What do hearing and speaking represent? Why would these be necessary for the Pilgrimage experience to be useful? Would someone who has one but not the other find the experience useful?

The Talmud concludes that one who neither speaks nor hears is exempt from attending the Pilgrimage. One who speaks but does not hear, or the opposite, is actually required to participate in the festivities but is not required to ‘see and be seen’.

Another word game: In attempting to explain why someone who does not speak is not required to attend, the Talmud brings a proof from a similar type of gathering, called ‘hekhel’, where ‘they will come to hear and come to learn.’ ‘To hear’ comes to exclude someone who cannot hear, and ‘to learn’ comes to exclude someone who does not speak.

Question 3: Assuming this is not a straw man, why would the Talmud think someone who cannot speak cannot learn? Does the Talmud have a definition of learning that requires speech?



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The Talmud tells a story to disprove itself: There were two mute men who sat in the academy of Rebbe. Whenever rebbe would enter, they too would enter and sit. They would nod their heads and move their lips. Rebbe prayed for them to be healed, and they were. It turned out they knew laws, and Midrash, and Mishnah.

Question 4: Clearly they were able to ‘learn’ without speaking. Why, then, was it important for Rebbe to pray that their speech be returned? Why did he wait so long to pray for them?

The word play: Mar Zutra, a rabbi in the Talmud, read the word לַמְדוּ in the verse ‘they will come to hear and come to learn’ not *yilamdu* – they will learn, but *yilamedu* – they will teach.

Question 5: Why is being able to teach an essential ingredient in being able to learn?

Question 6: How can we turn our students into teachers?

Question 7: How can the students be orchestrated into a useful system of teaching and learning from each other?

Lesson three – in praise of the learner

With Chagigah 3a middle to bottom.

The Torah states ‘Three times – פעמים – in the year, they shall be seen...’ The word פעמים also means legs – the Talmud proves this by bringing a verse from Song of Songs: ‘How lovely are your legs – פעמים – in shoes, daughter of the generous one!’ The Talmud then goes on to interpret the verse as follows:

Rava said: How lovely are your legs of the Jewish people when they go up to the pilgrimage! **Daughter of the generous one** – daughter of Abraham, who was called the generous one.’



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Abraham was known for his own pilgrimage – geographically, he left his homeland and traveled to Israel without knowing what would happen. Emotionally, he was the first to ‘convert’ to Judaism. And intellectually, he was not afraid to ask questions, and did not hesitate to turn away from unsatisfying answers.

The word for generous – נָתַן also means to volunteer. Avraham volunteered for this life adventure. Most of our students do not volunteer to be educated – it is mandated by local government. And Jewish education is often mandated by parents and expected by community.

And yet, we need to find a way to praise our students for participating as much as they do.

Question 1: What aspects of the student’s classroom *are* voluntary? How can we reflect and reward that?

Question 2: In what ways is a student like Avraham? How can we reflect that?

Question 3: Avraham asked hard questions, and was not satisfied with pat answers. He was committed to searching until he found answers that made sense. How do we handle a student who asks too many questions? What do we do if we are not capable of answering.

A personal anecdote: My father is said to have asked his Hebrew school teacher, at age 5, how the world could be 5700 years old if dinosaurs are millions of years old. He was told to shut up and not ask so many questions – thus ending his relationship to Judaism per se.

Question 4: If you genuinely believed the world was 5700 years old, how could you best answer the student’s question?

Lesson four – the academy vs. the tradition

With Chagigah: 3a bottom and 3b bottom



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The Talmud relates a story of two rabbis, Rebbe Yohanan ben Broka and Rebbe Elazar ben Chasma who went to see their Rabbi, Rebbe Yehoshua. When they met him, he asked ‘what novel ideas came out in the house of learning today?’

Question 1: First of all, it is amazing that he is interested in what other teachers are teaching. How do we show our students that we are still learning? How do we show them that learning is more important than pride?

They respond to him, ‘Rebbe! We are your students and we drink from your waters!’

They actually had good reason not to say it immediately, as one page later, the Talmud relates a similar passage: Once, R’ Yosi ben Dormaskit went to see his Rabbi, R’ Elazar. When Rebbe Elazar asked him what he had learned, R’ Yosi told him: ‘well, they voted and decided such and such...’ R’ Elazar said ‘put out your hands to receive your eyes’ – meaning, you will now be punished. He then said, ‘you go tell them that we don’t need your vote – I have a tradition from such-and-such a rabbi, who learned from his rabbi, all the way back to Moshe, that the law is such-and-such...’

Rebbe Yehoshua and Rebbe Elazar have entirely different responses to what other people are teaching. And this disagreement has everything to do with who they are as people. We learn more about them from another story. Here it is in paraphrase:

Once all the rabbis were learning about a certain oven, and when and if it became impure in certain circumstances. Everyone agreed except Rebbe Elazar (the ‘put out your hands to catch your eyes’ guy). He insisted he was right, and said ‘if I am right, let the carob tree prove it.’ Immediately the carob tree uprooted itself, to which Rebbe Yehoshua (the ‘what did you learn today?’ guy) said ‘we do not learn law from carob trees.’ The Rebbe Elazar said, ‘if I am right, let the stream prove it.’ The stream flowed backwards. ‘We do not learn the law from streams.’ ‘Let the walls of the academy prove it’ – the walls began to fall. Rebbe Yehoshua growled at them, and they stood half way between falling and standing, in deference to both of them. ‘Let a voice from heaven prove it’ – to which a voice came out from heaven and said ‘R’ Elazar is right.’ But Rebbe Yehoshua said ‘the matter is no longer to be determined in heaven.’



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Question 2: How does this story align with what we know about these two rabbis from the previous passages?

Devorah Steinmetz, a teacher in New York, points out the interesting use of the walls of the academy, for it is the academy itself that is at stake here. They are fighting about the academy itself – does the dialogue that happens therein matter, or is the tradition all that matters?

Question 3: Is our classroom/synagogue/home a place where dialogue matters, or do we base the value of our teachings solely on the basis of our having learned it? Do we expect our students to take our word for it?

Question 4: How can we find a balance between maintaining our role as teacher and the classroom as a place of dialogue?

The Talmud goes on to celebrate the fact that, if you walk into any academy, you will find some who think the law is this way, and some who think it is that way. And yet, they are all drawing from the same source. As educators, we should prepare our students by teaching them about disagreement. They must come to understand disagreement as a healthy relationship and not as an intimidating one.

Question 5: What are some ways to teach about holy disagreement?

Lesson five: the child at the gathering

With Chagigah 3a bottom

Rebbe Yehoshua succeeds in getting his students to tell him what exactly they learned: the presiding Rabbi, Rebbe Eliezer (not to be confused with Rebbe Elazar) expounded on issues concerning another kind of gathering that is similar to the Pilgrimage, called ‘hakhel’ – the basic mitzvah is that, every seven years, all the Jews would come to hear the king read the book of Deuteronomy. Unlike the Pilgrimage, however, men, women, and children were all supposed to come to ‘hakhel’. Rebbe Eliezer was teaching why the children would have to



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come: ‘The men come to learn; the women come to hear; and the children come to give reward to those who bring them.’

One famous commentary on the Torah, called the Kli Yakar, wonders what it means to be rewarded for bringing the children. If it is a matter of schlepping, then bring a bag of bricks! Clearly, he says, the children add something to the mix that no one else can.

Question 1: Imagine a meeting of all the Jews of a city to discuss matters of great importance. How would bringing the children add to the experience? What would the kids get out of it? What would the adults get out of it?

One understanding is that the kids bring a certain openness and innocence and non-judgment to the experience that can serve as an example for the adults.

Question 2: What do we learn from our kids in the classroom/synagogue/home? How do we reflect to them that we appreciate this?

In some synagogues, people get annoyed if there are kids around – it interrupts their focus on the service.

Question 3: How can we communicate to the adults the importance of bringing the kids?

Upon hearing this, Rebbe Yehoshua exclaims, ‘you wanted to keep this precious gem from me?’ Another famous commentary called Ben Ish Chai, explains why this was so interesting particularly to Rebbe Yehoshua. He quotes *another* commentary (they obviously had no qualms about learning from each other) named R’ Ovadia, who tells us that when Rebbe Yehoshua was a baby, his mother used to take him to the house of learning, and simply sit with him there so that he could absorb what was happening there. Clearly, he was not able to absorb the information. So he always wondered if it was worthwhile even to bring him – until this point. Now he knew that bringing him was useful.

Question 4: How was it useful to him to be brought into the house of



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learning when he was just a tiny baby?

Question 5: How was it useful for the adult learners to have him in the house of learning?